

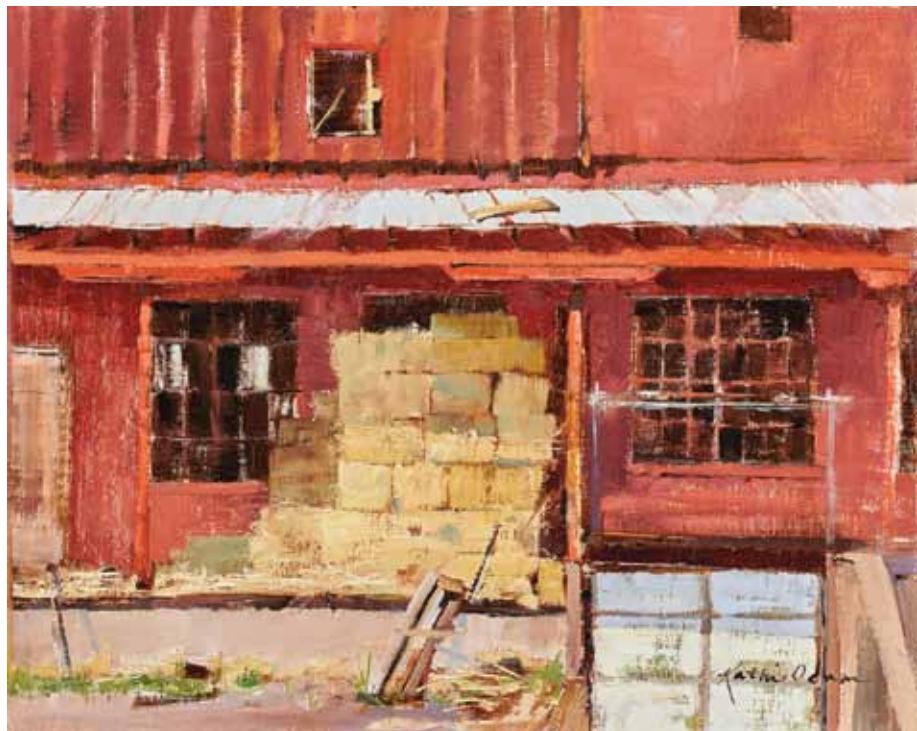
# Heart OF THE Country

**Kathie Odom's** paintings capture the nostalgia of her Tennessee homeland and beyond

BY NORMAN KOLPAS

LAST WINTER, Kathie Odom was driving down the highway in Madisonville, TN, about an hour from her home and studio on a historic residential street in Knoxville. Her goal was to pick up a piece of antique furniture for her family. But, as often happens to her these days, she found herself tempted to leave the well-paved path for “the little roads,” as she calls them. Suddenly, her attention was grabbed by a rambling old green barn; in front of it was a gently sloping field where a solitary black calf grazed beneath a bare tree.

“I knew right away that I would be



▲ **Southern Bales**, oil, 16 x 20.

◀ **Little Angus**, oil, 10 x 16.

painting that barn,” Odom says, her voice filled with warm enthusiasm as she recollects it all. “Green is one of my favorite colors to put in a painting, and I loved the fact that the barn had been added onto and added onto over the years, that it wasn’t perfect.”

She took out her smartphone and captured what she saw. “I am so grateful for iPhones,” she notes—the tool helps her grab reference materials for the roughly 30 percent of her works that she paints in her studio rather than in the open air. Later, she transferred the photos to her computer monitor, “which is large

enough to feel like outdoors to me.” And then, with the subject still fresh in her mind and an enlarged digital view of it that felt almost real, she set about creating LITTLE ANGUS. The painting is so evocative and inviting that viewers may well feel themselves drawn to wander into the scene, under the leafless limbs, past the curious calf, and through the dark yet inviting doorway of the green barn.

“I am very nostalgic,” says Odom, summing up not only what attracts her to a particular subject but also what leads her to portray it in a style she



WARREN BIELENBERG

## representation

**South Street Art Gallery**, Easton, MD; **Settlers West Galleries**, Tucson, AZ; **The District Gallery**, Knoxville, TN; **Mockingbird Gallery**, Bend, OR; **Leiper’s Creek Gallery**, Leiper’s Fork, TN; **Red Bird Gallery**, Seaside, FL; **Lagerquist Gallery**, Atlanta, GA.

## upcoming shows

Two-person show, **Mockingbird Gallery**, February 1-28.  
**American Miniatures**, Settlers West Galleries, February 9.  
**Olmsted Plein Air Invitational**, Atlanta, GA, April 29-May 5.



**Bed & Board, oil, 12 x 20.**



**Table 19, oil, 18 x 28.**

modestly describes as “representational impressionism”—though her expressive brush strokes feel like so much more than that basic categorization. “When I see something and connect to it, then I want to paint it. I paint what lifts my heart.”

Or, as she also likes to say, “It’s hard to ignore beauty when it happens.”

**ART AND OTHER** related aesthetic pursuits have lifted Odom’s heart for

as long as she can remember. Her earliest memory of a true personal artistic achievement traces back to the third grade at Highland Park Elementary School in Jackson, TN. “We were supposed to create a book of poems, and my mother took me to Woolworth’s or someplace, where we bought a whole package of colored construction paper.” To illustrate the assortment of poems she had collected, young Kathie cut out flowers and other pretty shapes. “My teacher looked at my mother and said,



**The Climber, oil, 12 x 16.**



‘This is Kathie’s gift.’ And I’ll never forget the experience of making that book and feeling so alive in it.”

Throughout her school years, she continued to thrive thanks to her art. Whether helping teachers create bulletin boards, or painting Holy Land scenery for puppet-show performances at vacation Bible camp, she was the go-to artist. All four years at Jackson Central-Merry High School, she signed up for art class, finding the ideal guide and cham-

pion in young teacher Claudia Freiman. “She was in it just as much as we were,” Odom remembers. From contour drawing to ceramics to fabric dyeing, young Kathie gained from her teacher the quiet confidence that she could tackle any creative pursuit that might come along.

Thus inspired, she enrolled at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, graduating in 1981 with a bachelor’s degree in art education. In retrospect, she admits, she wishes she had pursued a

more concentrated degree in fine art, “but the fear of being in school and knowing you’re going to get out and need to provide for a family leads us all to a safer route.”

Not that Kathie had any reason to regret such decisions at the time. In fact, she was joyously in love with Buddy Odom, a charming, handsome physical education major at UT she met during her senior year. She particularly admired the volunteer work he did with



▲ Sisters, oil, 14 x 11.

▶ Tied to the Land, oil, 24 x 40.



high-school kids—not to mention the “beautiful beard” he had at the time. Within three months of meeting, Buddy proposed. They married about a year and a half later and will celebrate their 38th anniversary this August, surrounded by their daughter, two sons, two daughters-in-law, and four grandchildren.

After graduation, Odom found a job that seemed a good match for her talents and training: working for the same lo-

cal gallery and framing business where she’d had her senior art show framed. She stayed there for about three years, leaving in 1983 when she first became a mother. “But being a stay-at-home mom didn’t last very long,” she notes. Having taken up quilting as a hobby, she soon found herself responsible for designing more than 200 wall hangings after a local designer caught sight of her work. And she launched her own at-home framing business “as a cottage industry,” she

says, which lasted more than 10 years.

Eventually, however, “I couldn’t look at glass or mats anymore,” Odom says. That’s when she set out to master faux-finishing, going on to a successful career “climbing scaffolding to make walls look like stucco with glaze, or doing wood-grain finishes like at Monticello.” But after a while, “the scaffolding and the climbing and the smell of the oil products became hard to live with, and that pushed me into other things.” She



helped renovate the buildings of an old camp in Weaverville, NC; worked for a high-end Knoxville interior designer; and went on to become a buyer and decorator for a furniture company.

If that series of endeavors sounds like she was beginning to feel at loose ends, the situation was not lost on her husband, either. And that's when Buddy gave his wife the perfect 50th-birthday present: a one-week oil-painting workshop at the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, NC. "I said to Buddy, 'I'm going by myself?'" laughs Kathie. "And he said, 'Oh, no. I'm doing an outdoor cooking class!'"

And so, in June 2009, the couple headed for the respected, century-old

rural center for communal learning. Almost instantly in the open-air painting sessions, Odom felt like she was rediscovering her true calling. "It was like God was saying to me, 'Here it is. You've wanted it. You thought this would be your life. So take it. Let's go with it!'"

**ODOM HEEDED** that calling. Back home, she found a personal mentor in painter Jeremy Doss, driving 30 to 45 minutes each way to study with him every week at his studio in Townsend, TN. "He encouraged me, to the point of saying, 'You've got something here, and you can do it,'" she recalls. Then, she formed her own local, weekly plein-air

group, the Tuesday Painters.

She also began signing up for more workshops, including one in which noted landscape painter Roger Dale Brown urged her to enter plein-air painting events. At her very first, held in the spring of 2013 at Callaway Gardens in Pine Mountain, GA, she not only received an honorable mention for her work but also won first place in the Quick Draw event. "That was mind-boggling," she says. "My chin was on the floor. And I thought, well, this really could be something."

And it really has been. During the almost six years since, Odom's work has earned well over three dozen awards, not to mention many more marks of



**Pop On Over, oil, 12 x 16.**



**I Hunger For Thee, oil, 15 x 24.**

distinction simply by being juried into top art shows across the nation. In that time, she has also been granted membership in such respected groups as the Salmagundi Club, the American Impressionist Society, the Laguna Plein Air Painters Association, the Plein Air Painters of the Southeast, the Arts and Culture Alliance of Greater Knoxville, and Oil Painters of America.

“I’m a little overwhelmed with it all,” she admits. “It just continues to get better. The fact that I love doing it and that other people notice—the encouragement they give me—is what probably keeps me painting. I don’t want to quit.”

Undoubtedly the greatest and most constant encouragement of all comes from Buddy. Himself a thoughtful, eloquent, and personable writer on themes of personal faith, he is also his wife’s full partner in the nonstop business of being a successful artist. “All

of this is happening because it’s taking both of us to do it,” says Kathie. “Buddy is a treasure.”

The feeling is entirely mutual. Buddy wrote these words in a blog post about his wife’s talent for tapping into the spirit of a scene: “The great artists (I imagine) not only see the landscape, but also, somehow, receive it. They don’t just reproduce what they see in a colorful way, they let the landscape enter them. And I think it is Kathie’s way of, may I say, contemplation. It’s a slowing down and a sort of participation with what is in front of her. She is not trying to make a statement or be productive with her work; she is receiving it and being received by it. When painting, it feels as though she is carrying on an unhindered dialogue.”

As she proudly marks her 60th birthday this month, Odom looks forward to continuing that unhindered dialogue

with her subjects. “I’m not looking for the best competition piece but for what would look beautiful in oil paint,” she says. And the odds remain strong that she’ll find that beauty in the rural life around her in Tennessee. She adds, “When I come across a beautiful old structure, you can guarantee that’s where I’m going to stop. That’s going to be my next subject.” ❖

Norman Kolpas is a Los Angeles-based freelancer who writes for *Mountain Living* and *Colorado Homes & Lifestyles* as well as *Southwest Art*.

See more of Odom’s work at  
[www.southwestart.com/featured/odom-k-jan2019](http://www.southwestart.com/featured/odom-k-jan2019).